

Oregon musicians launch She's Speaking

Virtual series features female songwriters writing about women who inspired them

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY

The Bulletin

Inspired by the life and work of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sisters songwriter Beth Wood wrote the song "One Step at a Time." The song became the catalyst for the virtual series She's Speaking.

"It was a song that was inspired by RBG that got me thinking about this whole direction," Wood said. "Wouldn't it be really cool to invite women songwriters to write songs about women that inspire them? And so not only are we amplifying women's voices, but also women's stories."

"One Step at a Time" is the first song featured in the March 8 launch video for the series, which is dedicated to female songwriters writing about the women who inspired them (and named for Vice President

Kamala Harris' now-famous "I'm speaking" quip during the Vice Presidential debate). Wood teamed with Salem's Kristen Grainger and Portland's Bre Gregg for the project, which will feature different performances five days a week, Tuesdays through Saturdays.

"When we started this we were hoping for like 10 videos, but instead we got 50-some," Gregg said. "So now we're going back through and we're doing artist highlights." The launch video featured 16 performances.

Wood cited a graphic listing the percentage of women in different roles in the music industry, including artists (22% women), songwriters (13%), producers (3%), engineers (3%) and label owners (15%). The graphic was posted to Instagram by Amplify Her Voice, an online platform "dedicated to helping advance the careers of women in music through educational, networking and creative opportunities."

"My interest is in helping to lift women's voices," Wood said. "And there are so many amazing women artists out there that are what I like to call blue-collar musician.

There's this whole sector of working musicians that are not on the charts, they're not on the radio, they're not on the Grammys. They're working people. I love taking songwriters that I think are amazing and showing them to other people, and being like, oh my gosh, check her out, she's so good. And that's one of the fun things about this channel too."

Wood, Grainger and Gregg have sourced performances from a "very curated list of songwriters," but have discussed opening it up to anyone who wants to submit a song. Featured artists so far include Mare Wakefield, Anna Tivel, Shireen Amini and Lady A, who hosted the launch video.

Submissions are limited to original songs, and for now they are sticking to the theme of women writing about women who inspired them, though they may expand to other themes in the future.

"It's a platform channel that'll exist forever," Grainger said. "We hope that it will continuously grow, and there will be more women's songs and tribute songs added to it, and different campaigns — maybe we do

young women or girls or some other kind of theme to it."

They've also thought about hosting a live event tied to the series when things start to open up more.

"Just judging from the energy of having us all together on Zoom the other night (for the launch video), I just can't imagine a live event, how inspiring and celebratory that would be," Wood said. "That's something that I would love to work toward. ... That really was for me a part of the seed in reaching out, is that I have missed collaborating so much. You can't harmonize on Zoom. So that has been one of the biggest gifts of this whole thing, is being able to collaborate with friends and also new songwriters that I'd never heard of before."

People can follow She's Speaking on YouTube (youtube.com/channel/UCoVBT-kpT-dWRQxqhe3c1eVw), Facebook (facebook.com/shesspeakingsongs) and Instagram (instagram.com/shesspeakingsongs/).

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in Bend, that doesn't seem to be necessarily proving true all the time?

A: I guess you're right. ... My boss — I had a bunch of bosses — but my boss in the promotion department (at Atlantic) was a woman, and I think she always tried to support women as much as she (could). So I feel like we had a lot of women on our staff, which was really great.

I just try not to look at people as gender. I try to look at people based on who they are as a person, and in the job setting, how well they do their job. I feel like I'm such a music head in general and I've always been passionate about music and the bands that I love. I'm not stupid. I just feel like the jobs that I've had, I've earned them.

... But I am very pro-women. I feel like we get the backseat so often. I just heard this story on NPR the other day about the pandemic, and how an X amount of the women in the workforce are not in the workforce anymore. And the numbers are such that it's the same as it was in 1982, because the women are staying home with the kids who have to be homeschooled. And that just broke my heart.

Q: From your perspective having been in the music industry for a long time, do you think it's better in the music industry or worse in the music industry for

women, just in general?

A: I think when you have a male-dominated industry it can be difficult on women no matter what. But I try not to focus on that stuff. I mean, personally, I always try not to focus on that; I just try to do the best job that I could do. But there's that kind of attitude and sexism and misogyny in every industry, every single one. ... At Bend Radio Group, I feel like our owner, Jim Gross, and Mike (Flanagan), who's our program director, I feel like they respect everybody — man, woman. Mike and I have deep, deep discussion about music and I don't think he ever thinks of me in any other way than as a peer who loves music. I think I've been pretty fortunate in the jobs that I've had.

RINDY ROSS



Rindy Ross

Vocalist and saxophonist Ross, along with her husband, Marv, started the band Jones Road in Bend in the 1970s. After relocating to Portland, the group changed its name to Seafood Mama and then Quarterflash, and scored a No. 1 Billboard Mainstream Rock hit with "Harden My Heart" in 1981. The Rosses retired Quarterflash and their long-running folk group, The Trail Band, in 2019 to focus on duo performances.

Q: What have your experiences been in an industry that has a reputation for being,

at times, difficult for women to be in?

A: It's interesting. I think women have — women in the music industry have greatly changed since I was that girl who plays the saxophone. I mean, it was just so unusual, and that is less of a big deal that a woman is playing an instrument. And in fact just the Grammys (on Sunday), it was kind of swept by women and women songwriters. So I think much has changed and I'm so glad to see that, but yeah, it's been a progression, as women in the workplace in general has been a progression over the ages.

I certainly had my experiences in recording, et cetera, where — I know one particular producer that we worked with that, I won't mention his name. On our third record, we were actually making the record in France and he was English. And he would only take feedback from Marv. I could say something like, "Well, you know, I think blah blah blah, this song needs this," and he would sometimes not even acknowledge I was speaking, and then other times just kind of nod his head and completely ignore it. And then Marv could come and say the exact same thing and he'd go, "Oh, done deal, bro." So it was very interesting and extremely nerve wracking for me, and I just learned to speak through Marv. I had to speak through my husband, which is never an ideal type situation. I think there's a whole lot

less of that, that women have more of a voice, which is how it should be, that women's voices are just as valued and respected as a man's voice.

BETH WOOD



Beth Wood

Singer-songwriter Wood is well known to Sisters Folk Festival audiences, and in April 2020 she relocated to Sisters from Bend (before that she lived in Portland and Eugene). She recently launched the virtual performance series She's Speaking alongside songwriters Kristen

Grainger and Bre Gregg (see sidebar for more information).

Q: What have your experiences been in an industry that has a reputation for being, at times, difficult for women to be in?

A: I've been doing this for almost 25 years now. There have been multiple times in my career where I have been told, "We can't add your song because we already have too many women on the radio this week." Or, I was in the final stages of negotiating with a national publisher about being an on-staff writer with them, and they came to us the following week and said, "Ah, I'm so sorry we can't do this; we have too many women writers already." It was maddening. There's nothing I could do in either of those situations.

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